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Tear Down This Tyranny

A Korea strategy for Bush's second term.

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THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION is not famous for patience with its critics. But for the sake of national security, the new Bush team should listen to constructive criticism of its policies--in particular, its policy for the North Korean nuclear crisis. The current U.S. approach to the North Korea problem is demonstrably flawed; arguably, even dangerously flawed.

Just what is wrong? After nearly four years in office, the curious fact remains that the Bush administration plainly lacks a strategy for dealing with the North Korean regime. Instead, it merely confronts Pyongyang with an attitude.

President Bush and his inner circle regard Kim Jong Il and his system with an admixture of loathing, contempt, and distrust--as well they might. Unfortunately, a mechanism for translating that point of view into effective action was manifestly absent from the statecraft of Bush's first-term administration. Long on attitude ("axis of evil") but short on strategy, the administration on North Korea was at times akin to a rudderless boat on an open sea.

Without rehearsing every detail, we might say that we have seen the Bush North Korea policy in "shocked by events" mode; we have seen it in "reactive" mode; we have seen it in "passive-aggressive" mode; and we have seen it in "paralyzed by infighting" mode. But we have yet to see it in "making bigger problems into smaller ones" mode.

A better approach for the second term might start with two strategic precepts:

Precept One: We are exceedingly unlikely to talk--or to bribe--the current North Korean government out of its nuclear quest. Talk and bribery have been tried for nearly 15 years--with miserable results. If Kim Jong Il ever could have been talked or bribed out of his nuclear program, the world's best opportunity was probably during the mid-1990s, when the nation was starving, and the regime's survival looked very much in doubt. We all know how the Clinton team's "denuclearization" deals in that era turned out: Pyongyang took the money, and plowed it into new covert nuclear programs.

Precept Two: The North Korean nuclear crisis is the North Korean government--and the North Korean government is the North Korean nuclear crisis. Unless and until we have a better class of dictator running North Korea, we will be faced with an ongoing and indeed growing North Korean

nuclear crisis. Pretending otherwise is a sure recipe for an even more dangerous situation.

Embracing those precepts would have immediate implications for American North Korea policy. Here are a few of the things a successful policy will require:

(1) Instituting regime change--at the State Department. If any doubt remained whether the first-term diplomatic team was up to the challenge of North Korea policy, it was removed by Secretary Colin Powell's hapless trip through East Asia last month, when he was publicly blindsided in both Beijing and Seoul by our putative partners in the Six Party Talks. North Korea is one of the most serious problems America faces today; our diplomatic crew needs to understand the threat.

(2) Defining "success" and "failure" for North Korea negotiations. To date, the Six Party Talks on North Korean denuclearization have produced--well, talk; meanwhile, North Korea has been racing to build up its nuclear arsenal. This perverse dynamic should be utterly unacceptable. For upcoming parlays, Washington needs to spell out clearly and in advance the outcomes that will constitute success, and those that amount to failure. And the administration must not be shy about declaring the process a failure if in fact it is.

(3) Increasing China's "ownership" of the North Korean problem. Thus far, Beijing has very successfully hedged the North Korean crisis--sometimes affecting to be part of the solution, other times directly contributing to the problem. Washington has been far too complacent about China's unprincipled ambiguity. After all: China will bear high costs if the current denuclearization diplomacy fails--and even greater dangers lie in store for Beijing if Pyongyang becomes a full-fledged nuclear power. Our cooperation with China will be more productive once we understand this. And once Beijing is obliged to think clearly about its own interests in North Korea threat reduction, we can expect a more forceful and consistent Chinese focus on the Kim Jong Il regime.

(4) Working around the pro-appeasement crowd in the South Korean government. U.S. policy on the North Korean crisis suffered a setback, and a serious one, with the December 2002 South Korean presidential election, thanks to which a coterie of New Left-style academics and activists assumed great influence over their government's security policies. Despite placid assurances from "old Korea hands" in the State Department and elsewhere that this crew would "mellow" in office, the core of this new government (a cadre dubbed "the Taliban" by the South Korean press) has remained implacably anti-American and reflexively pro-appeasement toward Pyongyang. (Last week, for example, South Korea's president publicly averred that both military and economic pressure were off the table as instruments for resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis; a few days later the South Korean Defense Ministry made the breathtaking announcement that North Korea would no longer be designated as the "primary enemy" facing its military forces.)

For all intents and purposes, South Korea is now a runaway ally: a country bordering a state committed to its destruction, and yet governed increasingly in accordance with graduate-school "peace studies"

desiderata--while at the same time relying on forward-positioned American troops and a security treaty with Washington to guarantee its safety. It is not too much to describe this utterly unnatural and unviable situation as our "second crisis" on the Korean peninsula.

The simultaneous task of salvaging the Washington-Seoul alliance while avoiding "Taliban" sabotage of a North Korea threat-reduction policy presents exceptional--indeed, extraordinary--challenges to U.S. statecraft. But not insurmountable ones. Over the past decade, some giant South Korean conglomerates that once boasted they were "too big to fail" have completely disappeared from the corporate scene. Everyone in South Korea today remembers this--so they can also intuit the hollowness of their current president's strange claim just last week that the U.S.-South Korean relationship is likewise too big to fail. Public opinion in South Korea is deeply--and quite evenly--divided on the North Korea question, and the current government earns consistently low approval ratings. Instead of appeasing South Korea's appeasers (as our policy to date has attempted to do, albeit clumsily) America should be speaking over their heads directly to the Korean people, building and nurturing the coalitions in South Korean domestic politics that will ultimately bring a prodigal ally back into the fold.

(5) Readying the nondiplomatic instruments for North Korea threat reduction. Diplomacy on the North Korean nuclear front may well fail--in which case a variety of nondiplomatic alternatives must be at the ready. Paradoxically, however, preparing for the deliberate use of nonconsensual, non-diplomatic options with North Korea will actually increase the probability of a diplomatic success.

(6) Planning for a post-Communist Korean peninsula. For far too long, policymakers in the United States and elsewhere have acted as if contemplating the practical implications of the Kim Jong Il regime's demise were somehow "thinking the unthinkable." Instead, American policy should be actively engaged in planning for a successful transition to a post-Kim Jong Il Korea--and in coordinating with allies and other interested parties to maximize the opportunities and minimize the risks in that delicate and potentially dangerous process. Many uncertainties lie in store on the road to a free, democratic, non-nuclear, and united Korean peninsula, but there can be absolutely no doubt that such a destination is the very best objective--not only for the Korean people but for all their neighbors as well.

AS PRESIDENT BUSH contemplates North Korea policy for a second term, he could do worse than to dwell on his legacy. During the presidential campaign, John Kerry asserted that the North Korea problem was worse now than four years ago--and he was right. (Kerry's own clueless prescription--to seek and cut a bilateral deal with Kim Jong Il--does not invalidate the diagnosis.)

Most people in the present administration judge the Clinton administration harshly for bequeathing to posterity a more serious international terrorist threat than it inherited--and rightly so. If North Korea's threat to America is greater four years from now than today, that will be a Bush

administration legacy. And history is unlikely to judge such a legacy kindly.

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